

October Is Breast Cancer Awareness Month

Breast Cancer Awareness Month occurs every October to raise awareness of this disease. Over the course of a lifetime, 1 in 8 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer. The American Cancer Society estimates that there will be 226,870 new cases and 39,510 deaths from invasive breast cancer among women in the United States in 2012.

Disparities

Breast cancer continues to be a leading cause of cancer mortality and morbidity for all women regardless of race; however, there are significant disparities in incidence and mortality rates. In Los Angeles County, white women and black women have the highest incidence of invasive breast cancer (152.6 and 126.4 per 100,000 female population, respectively). Black women have the highest mortality rate at 36.6 per 100,000 female population compared to 22.9 per 100,000 female population overall.

Risk Factors

Many women with breast cancer have no apparent risk factors for the condition other than being a woman and growing older. However, in addition to genetic factors, use of combined hormone therapy, radiation exposure, obesity, and alcohol use can contribute to the risk of developing breast cancer. Even when a woman with risk factors develops breast cancer, it is hard to know just how much these factors may have contributed to her cancer.

Screening Guidelines

Early detection of breast cancer is imperative for reducing mortality rates. Studies show that screening to detect early-stage invasive cancer with mammography reduces mortality rates by 15 to 25 percent. However, screening mammography is also associated with potential harms, including over-diagnosis and false-positive results that can result in unnecessary additional imaging and biopsy procedures. In balancing the harms and benefits of mammography, new guidelines by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force were released in 2009.

Recommendations for screening mammography are as follows:

- Women aged 40-49: Talk with your health care provider about when to start having mammograms and how often. Factors to consider include your risk factors and your personal beliefs about the potential benefits and harms of screening.
- Women aged 50-74: Have a mammogram every 2 years.
- Women aged 75 or older: Talk with your health care provider.

Prevention Measures

Although there are controllable risk factors to reduce the risk of breast cancer, such as limiting alcohol intake, exercising, and staying at a healthy weight, women should talk to their health care provider to determine the best personalized preventive strategy for them.

For more information on women's health, go to www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/owh. To find out whether you qualify for a free mammogram, call 1-800-793-8090.